Beyond Mere Christianity

C.S. Lewis and the Betrayal of Christianity

ISBN

Beyond Mere Christianity

C.S. LEWIS AND THE BETRAYAL OF CHRISTIANITY

Brandon Toropov

Darussalam
Publishers and Distributors
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Yusuf10106@aol.com
www.JesustheMuslim.com

This book is dedicated to Najela

Note:
What follows examines the beliefs and teachings of Jesus and Muhammad; peace and blessings be upon them both.

Table of Contents

BEFORE EACH *chapter,*
there is a brief passage like this that tells you
a little bit about my journey to Islam.

I came to Islam after three decades of restless
dissatisfaction with conventional Christianity.
Although I've read a lot of conversion stories
since I embraced Islam in March of 2003,
I haven't found many that cited the Gospels
as a point of entry to the Holy Qur'an.
That is how it was for me.

If you are a Christian reading this book,
please know that what follows is not meant
disrespectfully, but is offered only in the
service of a deep, shared love of the Messiah.

ONE:

Why 'Mere'?

THE DEEPEST AND BITTEREST curse of ancient China, supposedly, was 'May you live in interesting times.'

Those of us who have lived as Christians in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have, for reasons that may mystify us, found ourselves living in very interesting times indeed. In recent years, uneasiness about Islam has been increasingly impossible to ignore in the United States, Europe, and Australia.

In particular, one hears a great deal today about a 'war,' 'conflict,' or 'clash' between Islam and Christianity. The topic is so prominent in the media that many people assume that there is something irreconcilable between these two approaches to God. It is not surprising, then, that so many Christians of good will have concluded that Islam and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible.

Yet, if, by 'Christianity', we mean 'that which Jesus Christ meant to convey to his hearers', I believe that these people of good will may well be mistaken when they tell us that Islam is incompatible with Christianity.

What's more, I believe we can now make the case that the historically oldest Gospel verses reflecting the reported sayings of Jesus are entirely compatible with Islam.

ꟸꟸꟸ

This is a book for Christians, and about Islam. These days, anyone who writes such a book should expect to face a *skeptical* audience, and that is just as well. Skepticism about important matters is healthy.

What's more, the author of a book like this one should probably expect only *thoughtful* Christians to accompany him to the end of the page, or, God willing, beyond. Only thoughtful people are willing to examine their own religious assumptions closely.

The thoughtful, skeptical Christian, then, is the audience for this book. That you have read even this far suggests that you are a thoughtful Christian. So please complete the equation and be as skeptical as you possibly can as you make your way through these pages.

ꟸꟸꟸ

What, specifically, is there to be skeptical about?

We can start with the title. The book is called *Beyond Mere Christianity* for two reasons. First, in response to C.S. Lewis' influential 1952 work, *Mere Christianity*, which stands as a masterpiece of Christian apologetics and perpetuates, I believe, a long-standing betrayal of the ministry of Jesus.

The second reason, perhaps less obvious, is that a case can be made, based on current, responsible Gospel scholarship, that Jesus was calling his people to the Salvation that lies beyond the worship of the merely created, and that relies instead on the direct worship of the Creator. I believe emphatically that this variety of direct worship is Islam, and that the authentic words of Jesus emphatically invite us to move beyond what is conventionally understood as Christianity for this Salvation, and enter with no delay the 'house' of Islam (to borrow a metaphor from Lewis). Which room we choose to occupy once we're inside, of course, is up to us.

If you're a Christian, and you find that you are skeptical about these points, then we're ready to move on.

❧ ❧ ❧

The word 'Islam' means, simultaneously, 'submission' and 'peace'. This faith demands in no uncertain terms that its adherents reject anything and everything that conflicts with obedience to God. It does not mandate blind obedience to any human authority.

I believe that someone who scrupulously follows this religion's command of submission to God Alone is in fact adhering completely to the authentic teachings of Jesus, at least to the degree that they are reflected in the surviving Gospels. I also believe this religion is precisely the same one he preached and practiced.

Holding and expressing this view has led me into any number of interesting life experiences, many of which involved heated discussions with Christians who believed a) that I had no right to describe myself any longer as a follower of Jesus, and b) that Islam and Christianity have far more separating them than they have in common. This book challenges thoughtful Christians to consider the discussions that follow before coming to a final conclusion on a) and b), above.

❧❧❧

If you are a Christian, the idea that Jesus practiced the same faith that today's news broadcasts hold responsible for so many of the world's problems probably seems far-fetched to you.

It certainly seemed far-fetched to me when I first encountered it. Yet many contemporary Christians have reached life-changing personal conclusions about the Gospel message and its relation to Islam. A prominent American sheikh, Yusuf Estes, is an obvious example, and there are many others.

The American television news magazines usually don't share the stories of these converts to Islam with the world at large, and their motivations sometimes seem mysterious to non-Muslims who encounter them. From personal experience, though, I strongly suspect that most of these people found themselves, at the end of the day, deeply concerned about the consequences of calling Jesus 'Lord' without obeying his instructions—found themselves far more concerned about that command, in fact, than about any media coverage of geopolitical issues.

So we changed our lives.

❧ ❧ ❧

People like us do indeed exist in North America, Europe, and Australia. There are more of us than you may imagine. This book is here to give you a clear answer to the question we hear over and over again: 'Why?'

Why would a Christian believer choose to embrace *this* faith, over all the other possible faith choices? *Why*

pursue the one system of worship that most of today's commentators agree is 'at odds with Christianity'? *Why* leave the familiar congregations of friends, relatives, and members of the clergy — congregations whose concern and support sustained us for so long, and who would rejoice if we were only to renounce Islam and return to the way of life of which they approve?

The pages that follow, aim to answer these questions.

❧❧❧

Two flawed understandings of Islam can present a major challenge for anyone trying to come to terms with it. First and foremost is the notion that it is an anti-Christian faith. It is not. Christians often express profound surprise at Islam's extraordinary reverence for Jesus, and for the special status that Christians enjoy under traditional Islamic law.

The second misconception is the common notion that Islam is rooted in violence. Outsiders studying the actual teachings of the faith are usually caught unawares by its ceaseless promotion of mercy and forgiveness over violence and revenge.

Even if political upheavals, irresponsible media coverage, and the lunacy of religious extremists have sometimes combined to obscure these two core truths of Islam—as a cloud may seem, for a time, to blot out

the sun—they remain core truths nevertheless. I hope my work here does these truths justice, but if it does not, the responsibility lies not with Islam, but with me.

I was *born in Los Angeles, California, in 1961.*

My parents did not practice Christianity,
but other relatives and friends did, and the
teachings of Jesus Christ emerged early in my life
as the 'true north' of my spiritual journey.

I was drawn to the Gospels at a young age–eleven–
and I read them compulsively.

I still have the red King James Bible I bought
as a child; my own handwritten note on the
front page proclaims June 26, 1974, as the date
I accepted Jesus as my personal savior.

TWO:

What is 'Q'?

> *(Jesus) spoke out: 'I am indeed a servant of God. He has given to me the Book and made me a Prophet. Wherever I go, His blessings follow me.'* (QUR'AN 19:30)

THERE IS, IN TERMS OF LITERAL CONTENT, little for a mainstream Christian to object to in the passage from the Qur'an you just read. Virtually all Christian theologies accept Jesus' role as Prophet, or Messenger of God. If 'Book' means an authentic Divine Revelation, surely no Christian would dispute that Jesus received this.

But that is the content. The context is a different matter. The very fact that the words in question appear in the Qur'an, rather than in the Gospels, is enough to give many people pause.

❧❧❧

Most contemporary Christians simply do not believe that Jesus was a practitioner of the same religion practiced by Muslims. To be more specific: Most Christians do not believe that Jesus' actual mission and teachings, by whatever name we may choose to call them, would be recognizable to a contemporary Christian, or even to a fair-minded neutral observer, as those of the Prophet Muhammad.

If you were to switch on a time machine and set out to test the matter, ninety-nine out of a hundred Christians would probably predict that your journey back through time would prove definitively that Jesus was not, in fact, a Muslim.

The problem is that most of those ninety-nine people would have a hard time describing, in even the vaguest terms, what a Muslim actually believes.

❧❧❧

We don't have a time machine, of course, and perhaps it would be better for us not to wish for one. How many of us would actually risk making such a trip for the first time, risking the possibility that we might never return to the certainties of our present lives?

It might be safer and more practical to plan a different kind of journey. It might be better—at least for those of us who are not particularly brave about

journeys—if *Jesus* could gain access to the time machine and approach *us.*

ꟿ ꟿ ꟿ

Fortunately, we are in a position to ask Jesus to make just that kind of journey through time for us.

We can appeal to a kind of 'hard evidence'—evidence, at any rate, that should be of interest to thoughtful Christians. The evidence to which we can appeal, the journey Jesus makes on our behalf, resides in the Gospels, in words attributed to Jesus himself. We can evaluate these words on their own merits. Then we can compare these words to the core principles of Islam.

You will be reading, in this book, a number of New Testament scriptures. When a passage like this comes up, it will appear in **this kind of bold type,** and indented. Quotes of prominent Christians are in ***bold type, italics*** and indented, while passages from the Qur'an are in *italics style* and indented.

ꟿ ꟿ ꟿ

Now, it is a common, and probably a fair, complaint from Christians that Muslims sometimes 'pick and choose' their way through the New Testament in discussions about Jesus. Some Muslims cite the Gospel of John one moment to prove some prophecy or other,

and then, the next moment, dismiss the sixteenth verse of the third chapter in that same Gospel, which describes Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. Similarly, some Muslims appeal with great enthusiasm to St. Paul's advice to women to cover their heads in public, but ignore the portions of his epistles that emphasize Jesus' role as the sacrificial Savior of humanity.

This kind of flip-flopping exasperates the Christians and embarrasses Muslims, or ought to. Selective criticisms like these ignore the question 'How did you come to prefer that passage over this one?' They are demeaning to people of any faith or tradition, because they suggest that religion is little more than a rhetorical game in which an opponent's fundamental beliefs can be uprooted easily—if only one knows what to ignore. No one, I think, is convinced by these kinds of arguments.

Of course, this book relies to a certain extent on my own Biblical interpretation and arguments. But you should understand that, for the purposes of consistency, historical authenticity, and clarity, this book is different from other Islamic assessments of the Gospels. This book relies primarily on a very narrowly defined group of verses, verses that are not to be found in the Gospel of John or in any of the Epistles. So when a thoughtful Christian asks, 'Why do you prefer verse X over verse Y?' the answer can be a clear one:

'Because responsible scholars believe verse X to be older in derivation, and therefore more likely to be authentic.'

℘℘℘

The verses in question, known as Q verses, are the passages many of today's scholars believe to be the *earliest surviving* expression of the oral tradition of sayings attributed to Jesus.

Make no mistake: *This is your father's (and grandfather's, and great-grandfather's) New Testament.* Yet the focus here is on Gospel verses that were, in all probability, compiled long before the text surrounding them was.

℘℘℘

The remnants of a lost, but identifiable, 'sayings gospel' called Q (from the German *Quelle,* or 'source') do appear in Matthew and Luke.

What, you may ask, was a 'sayings gospel'? This was, scholars believe, an ancient document consisting of instructions attributed to Jesus, 'sayings' *that generally lack narrative material*.

A sayings gospel would have carried material that eventually found its way into the Gospels we are familiar with—but a sayings gospel would have made no attempt to tell the life story of Jesus.

ꝏꝏꝏ

A little background is in order. The Gospel of Mark, most scholars believe, is the oldest extant Gospel. Intriguingly, Matthew and Luke depend on Mark for much, but not all, of their material. (The Gospel of John does not depend on any other Gospel in a textual sense; it is independent in a way that the other three Gospels are not. It is also compiled later.)

When we *remove* the influence of Mark and look at what Matthew and Luke *still have in common*, we find dozens of obviously parallel verses in Matthew and Luke—verses that often give us nearly verbatim expressions of the same saying.

Many scholars feel these parallel verses constitute clear evidence of a sayings gospel that supplies Matthew and Luke with a substantial amount of their content. These parallel verses, known as the Q verses, appear to reflect a lost manuscript that is almost certainly older than even Mark's Gospel.

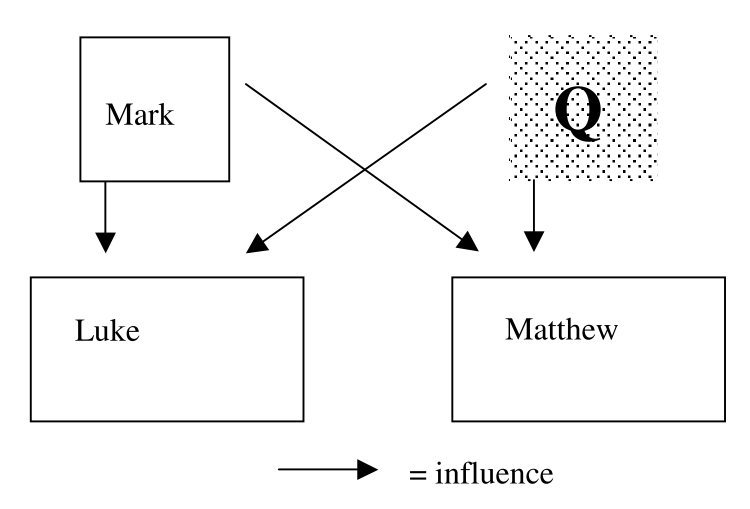
ꝏꝏꝏ

This all sounds, perhaps, more complex than it actually is. The simplest explanation for the situation we are examining is known as the *Two Source Theory.* This theory holds that the authors of Matthew and Luke made use of *two* important written sources—Mark and

the lost gospel we now call Q—in developing their own accounts of the life of Jesus.

Here is a simple visual summary of the Two Source Theory on the next page, which is not my creation; this theory is familiar to virtually all responsible contemporary Gospel textual scholars, and has been a topic of scholarly discussion for many years.

Now, even this brief summary of Q is enough to stir up any number of intricate scholarly debates, and this book is not meant to be about scholarly debates. You should know, however, that the analysis of the development of the Gospels you have just read reflects the findings of some of the most accomplished researchers and scholars working in the field of New Testament textual studies. See *The Complete Gospels,* edited by Robert J. Miller, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.



'Traditionalist' Christian clergy and theologians are generally hostile to the whole idea of Q. They claim that students of Q are somehow eager to diminish the status of Jesus. (Actually, we are only eager to learn what he is most likely to have said.)

The hostility of these preachers and theologians to the proposition that Q was a source for Matthew and Luke is often palpable. Such a response may have something to do with the many challenges that the reconstructed text reflecting the (lost) Q manuscript represents to accepted Christian theology.

One part of this challenge that has been little noticed by lay Christians up to this point—but feared, I suspect, by orthodox Christian theologians—has to do with Islam.

It is the observation, difficult to avoid for any attentive student of comparative religion that Q tends to support the most important elements of Islam's conception of Jesus.

❧ ❧ ❧

The Q scholarship suggests that the ways most Muslims have, down the centuries, envisioned the message, identity, and priorities of Jesus are, broadly speaking, historically correct.

Specifically, Q tends to confirm Islam's image of Jesus as a distinctly human Prophet.

It tends to confirm Islam's depiction of the mission of Jesus as following the theological principles of the Qur'an.

It tends to confirm Islam's rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity.

And it tends to confirm Islam's claim that the surviving scriptures of Christianity have been tampered with in a way meant to dilute an uncompromisingly rigorous monotheism.

This particular variety of monotheism, Islam has always insisted, was the driving force of all the great prophetic missions, including that of Jesus.

This particular variety of monotheism allows for no such formulation as 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'.

❧❧❧

These connections between the message of Islam and the message of Q are my observations, not the observations of the textual scholars who have done such meticulous work over the years identifying the early Gospel verses. Those scholars are writing about textual research. This book is about Jesus and Islam.

You may agree with the evidence offered in the pages that follow. You may disagree. In the end, it doesn't really matter how popular or unpopular the

analysis offered here proves to be. What matters is that thoughtful Christians have the opportunity to evaluate it fairly and make their own decisions.

❧❧❧

What exactly do I mean when I maintain that Jesus called his people 'to Islam'?

Let me put it as clearly as I can. I believe that Jesus was, as a matter of historical probability, calling his listeners to a faith system whose guiding principle is that the Creator, not the created, must be worshipped and obeyed. It is a corollary of this belief that God's will, not human will, should be done on earth.

I believe later manipulations subverted that teaching and pointed the religion of Jesus toward the principle of sacrificial atonement for the sins of mankind. I believe that the Q verses of the Gospels tend to confirm these beliefs of mine.

❧❧❧

Occasionally, people wonder if it is possible to 'boil down' the complex textual issues raised by Q scholarship to a single sentence. Here is the sentence I've come up with:

> Today's best New Testament experts believe that some Gospel verses appear to present a more

historically accurate picture of Jesus than other Gospel verses do.

That is to say, today's scholarship identifies certain passages—the Q passages—as not only instructive, but *historically is more relevant* than other passages. Yet most Christians are totally unaware of this research, or of its momentous implications.

If you were to tell the members of any Christian congregation of the existence of such verses … and then ask them what they believe the earliest layer of Gospel verses teaches … most of them would answer that the earliest verses must somehow emphasize Jesus' status as the only begotten Son of God.

And yet they would be mistaken.

Of course, reasonable people may disagree on the age and authenticity of the sayings that form the centerpiece of this book.

Everyone must agree, though, that the words in question do appear in the Gospels found in every Bible, and are binding on every Christian. And for anyone who is truly committed to the task of following the words of Jesus, that should be enough.

To learn more about why so many scholars are so insistent now about the early dating of the passages in question, see *Appendix A*. For now, please understand that this book puts forward a very narrow 'slice' of the New Testament, and emphasizes the sayings that

appear within that slice. As you evaluate that 'slice', bear in mind that the most accomplished Biblical scholars of our day—none of them Muslims, by the way—regard the Q verses in Matthew and Luke as the closest we are ever going to get to the teachings of the historical Jesus, barring the discovery of some previously unknown ancient text.

❦❦❦

Some people who hear my reasons for believing as I do react with great anger, and many of these angry people attempt to discredit the scholarship behind Q. They are missing the point.

Whether the Q theory is persuasive to you depends on your interpretation of the evidence. Yet even if you *reject* all the work of all the Q scholars, this book may nevertheless be of interest to you, assuming two and only two facts:

First, that you are a thoughtful Christian capable of making decisions for yourself about important matters (such as whether or not Jesus preached publicly about his own sacrifice for the sins of mankind).

And second, that you *do not reject the Gospel verses in question.*

This second point is extremely important, and worth emphasizing. Even if one were to disagree vehemently with the scholars on the dating of the Q

verses, one would have a very hard time indeed disputing their presence in the New Testament.

They are there, whether or not one accepts Q as a source for the Gospels, and whether or not they are convenient to contemporary Christian theology.

It is possible, of course, that some people may feel uncomfortable with the whole idea of certain Gospel passages being older or more authoritative than other Gospel passages. If it is easier to think of the verses that appear in the pages that follow as simply coming from certain portions of the Bible—portions that the author happens to prefer over other portions—that is just as well.

There is nothing 'new' here. There is only an attempt to refocus, or perhaps focus for the first time, on something very old, on some vitally important parts of Jesus' message.

If you consider the study of the Gospels to be an important part of your spiritual life, I hope you will consider continuing on to the next chapter. If, on the other hand, you believe that what we find in the Gospels does not have any bearing on your spiritual life, you may want to stop here.

For most *of my adolescence I studied the Christian scriptures on my own, and I did so obsessively.*

When I say I read the scriptures obsessively, I mean that I was drawn to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John like a magnet.

There are plenty of notes and highlights in that old Bible of mine in Psalms, in Ecclesiastes, in Proverbs—but most of the notes and underlining are in the Gospels. But I sensed, even at an early age, that there were some internal problems with the texts I loved so dearly.

THREE:

'Natural Law'

> *'So, whosoever accepts guidance, it is only for his own self, and whosoever goes astray, he goes astray only to his (own) loss.'* (QUR'AN 39:41)

> *'And whomsoever God wills to guide, He opens his breast to submission, and whomsoever He wills to send astray, He makes his breast closed and constricted, as if he is climbing up to the sky. Thus God puts the wrath on those who believe not.'* (QUR'AN, 6:125)

HOW DO HUMAN BEINGS determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong? What is that process and how does it operate?

There are Christian scholars and theologians who teach as Christian doctrine the principle that *humanity itself* instills a basic, enduring, and predictable moral sense in human communities. This moral sense, we are

told, is God's consistent, impossible-to-ignore standard of behavior, a standard that is always clear to the human community. For instance, C.S. Lewis, the author of *Mere Christianity,* and the most celebrated modern Christian writer in English, insists on this view.

❧❧❧

Even a tyrant, we are told, consistently 'knows right from wrong' (regardless of whether he chooses to acknowledge the distinction to himself). We know this; the argument goes, because the tyrant will attempt to present at least the appearance of virtue to the outside world. This understanding of right and wrong action may be something a person employs selectively, but, we are told, it is reliable.

Even a hypocrite, the theory holds, has a fundamental sense of propriety. Hypocrites claim to act by one set of standards (because they know these standards are right, or regarded as such), but actually act by a different set of standards (which they know to be wrong).

Even a sadistic person, we hear, will, after having crushed a helpless victim to steal away some advantage, claim that the action was justified, or 'fair', given the situation he or she faced.

If there are exceptions to this notion of an enduring, fundamentally human moral sense, we are told, it is only because of the rare individual who lacks any ability to perceive right or wrong, or any ability to 'fake' that perception. Such a person, the theory goes, is nothing more than an anomaly, a chance result like that which shows up on the far end of a bell curve. Just as the occasional person may be color-blind or may have trouble singing in the proper key, there may be a statistically insignificant number of people born who lack this fundamental, consistent human ability to distinguish right from wrong. Such 'amoral' people are, supposedly, something like genetic aberrations—freaks of nature. Yet human beings as a group, we are assured, have a distinct, enduring, and consistent capacity to distinguish right from wrong.

***

This inherent ability to tell right from wrong is sometimes referred to as 'Natural Law', or the 'Law of Human Nature'. The phrase suggests a static, predictable moral standard (or *law*) that is, though often ignored, consistent and predictable (or *natural*) for the overwhelming majority of real human beings like you and me.

This doctrine has become an important pillar of what we now call mainstream Christian theology. God

has set a clear, consistent standard of right and wrong that humanity, if it does not always obey, definitely understands without any problem.

Islam regards this notion as incomplete. Jesus Christ regards it as incomplete too, and you will see why in a moment.

ꟹ ꟹ ꟹ

Islam envisions each human being as possessing a) free will, and b) a soul that knows what is good for it and what is bad for it, a soul that God has inspired to advise us to choose the good. Some people, however, use free will in such a way as to make themselves increasingly deaf to the soul's advice. And this is the part, a Muslim might argue, that Lewis leaves out.

Lewis ignores the possibility that when human beings make choices, those choices will either degrade the soul or purify it.

Islam holds that people who consciously make choices that *support* the soul's inherent longing for righteousness are dynamically brought toward the moral clarity God intended for them, becoming more and more certain about what is right and what is wrong.

ꟹ ꟹ ꟹ

On the other hand, people who consciously make choices that *oppose* their own souls' inherent longing for righteousness *do violence to their own souls.* They imagine themselves safe from God's plan, immune from accountability to Him. And this is folly.

So. God knows all and understands all; God has also granted humankind free will. We are left, as the result of our own choices, with a steadily improving or steadily deteriorating ability to distinguish right from wrong.

Submission to the Will of the One God, Islam holds, *improves* the ability to distinguish good choices from bad ones. Resistance to the Will of the One God *degrades* this ability. A firm, obstinate, long-term policy of resistance to the Will of the One God leads one to worship one's own desires first and foremost, and to abandon even the charade of moral authority. This is true catastrophe.

Our ability to distinguish right from wrong, Islam holds, is *not* consistent and predictable, but variable. This ability to distinguish right from wrong is part of God's Plan, of course, but from our point of view it depends upon our own choices and thoughts.

❧❧❧

If we persist in the delusion of self-sufficiency and independence from God, Islam tells us, we will eventually be engulfed by our own delusion, and those

delusions will eventually take over our lives and our very ability to reason.

If we persist in worshipping our own desires as though *they* were god—thereby ignoring God—a truly horrifying thing happens. Those desires become the rulers of our lives.

❦❦❦

This whole process, Islam insists, is *dynamic.* We are constantly in motion. The question is, in which direction?

A tyrant, an alcoholic, a drug addict, a serial killer, or anyone else in an advanced stage of self-absorption and self-worship will *eventually* cease even to pretend that he or she is under any obligation to distinguish right from wrong. Such a person will *eventually* cease to believe that such distinctions are important. These people, Muslims believe, advance themselves toward their own doom.

Once again: the question is one of *movement*.

It is as if someone were asking us, 'Where are you going?' and then helping us to travel in what-ever direction we ourselves identified. There is a destination of darkness, darkness that accumulates as the direct result of a personal choice to embrace it. Think of Adolf Hitler, who was not merely unstable, but *increasingly* unstable as the Second World War

ground on. In his final days, Hitler railed even against the German people he once claimed to have been the Master Race. What greater perversion of his own 'standards' can we imagine? Or think of the late-stage John Belushi, whose beastly behavior near the end of his life shocked even the Hollywood of the early 1980s (a community not easily shocked). Belushi, in his final months, terrified some very jaded people, some of whom had known him for many years.

People with such 'moral standards' do not inherit them at birth; they *earn* them, usually through years of patient, persistent, soul-destroying effort. People who reach this bleak and horrifying point reach it, not because they have a genetic flaw akin to that which imparts color-blindness or a bad ear for pitch, but because they choose, over and over again, to go astray. And the choosing becomes easier with each choice.

Aleister Crowley, the self-proclaimed Satanist, embraced a world-view in which 'do what thou wilt shall be the law of the land'. Surely he was not born with such beliefs. Surely he had to strive to attain them.

❦❦❦

This idea of striving is quite important. Some kind of striving is seen, in Islam, as a *constant* feature of human nature. One is either striving toward the

purification of one's own soul, or striving toward its *degradation*.

To persist in the former is true victory; to persist in the latter is the ultimate defeat.

And this, the oldest Gospel verses suggest, is the understanding of human moral vision that Jesus wishes us to have.

ꝹꝹꝹ

> **'And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.'** (MATTHEW 23:12)

ꝹꝹꝹ

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit the challenging nature of a verse such as this one. The Bible tells us that we are reading the words of Jesus … but somehow the words do not seem to match up easily with what we may have been taught about Jesus.

In fact, this is the kind of verse we may have read dozens, hundreds of times without really 'getting' what it is trying to say. There are many Gospel passages like this, passages we are likely to rush past or 'file' for future study if we can't instantly apply them to our lives.

What if we were to linger over a verse like this for a while?

Is it possible Jesus is saying to us that a *moral* view that relies on the promotion of selfish, narrow interests will lead, in predictable measure, to *spiritual* loss?

Is it possible Jesus wants us to understand that a *moral* view that rejects selfish obsession will lead, just as predictably, to *spiritual* gain?

Perhaps Jesus is warning us to beware of the kind of striving that is based on self-absorption, on self-promotion, on self-obsession.

ℬ ℬ ℬ

Elsewhere, Jesus tells us to keep our eyes open to the light, that we may gain more light. This is another 'difficult' saying. Please take a moment to read the words below closely and prayerfully … even if you have read them many times in the past. It's possible that, like me, you read them dozens of times without quite grasping what they meant.

ℬ ℬ ℬ

> **'The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness. Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness.' (Luke 11:34-35)**

ꝏ ꝏ ꝏ

Again, we must be willing to sit quietly for a while with passages like this one. We cannot speed-read such words. We have to come to them on their own terms and be willing to take our time in considering them. Some teachings are meant to be contemplated for a while.

Once we have slowed down enough to sit with these words, once we have asked God for guidance, we may feel them entering us at a depth.

Having stopped to listen carefully to these words, we may conclude that they have something to do with *moral* perception, with determining what is right in our lives and what is wrong in our lives.

Aren't these words really telling us that moral vision, like moral blindness, perpetuates and strengthens itself?

Notice the words: 'flooded with light.' In these sayings, Jesus seems to be telling us that those who strive hard for righteousness will have not just a reward, but a *cumulative* reward. By the same token, he tells us that those who strive in the other direction will have not just a penalty, but a *cumulative* penalty that pushes them into a 'negative zone.' He is talking about a dynamic process, about a soul in motion.

We may eventually conclude that these words are all about our ability to *listen to the promptings of our own soul.*

Again—you may find that you agree with this interpretation; you may find that you disagree with it. The only mistake, I think, lies in letting *empty force of habit* cheat us out of the chance for a direct encounter with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Consider yet another 'difficult' passage from the Gospels.

❦❦❦

> **'For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him.'** (LUKE 19:26)

❦❦❦

As a matter of practical experience, this passage makes no sense. I have no apples—two apples must be taken from me. How can one take something away from a person who has nothing?

Yet when we consider the idea of the soul that knows what is good for it and what is bad for it, the soul that we listen to ever more closely or deafen ourselves to ever more obstinately, is the saying really

that puzzling? These words may well make the only possible sense … the ultimate sense.

This important verse, when we compare it to those we have examined already, may become a little clearer to us. If we sit with it for a time, it may begin to speak to us. And what it says could sound something like this: *Our choices magnify themselves. When we listen to our souls and strive to acquire favor with God, we are granted more of His favor. When we strive in the other direction, we dig ourselves into a hole.*

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

Jesus tells us in other sayings that it is what we *sustain* in our heart, ultimately, that makes true success possible for human beings. Consider these words.

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

> **'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.'** (MATTHEW 6:21)

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

> **'A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the**

abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.' (LUKE 6:45)

❦❦❦

It is as though Jesus were asking us: *What are you doing with your heart? How are you investing it? Are you using it to build up a surplus, or to bring about a deficit in your life? Where are you going?*

He also tells us, as though with a nod and a wink, of the woman who conceals leaven in fifty measures of flour. How it grows for her!

May I ask you to take just a moment right now to pray to God for guidance in discerning the real meaning of the important verses you have read in this chapter? Perhaps you should do so before you continue with the next chapter of this book.

If the words in question were my words, I would understand and respect your decision to decline this request of mine to pray for guidance. But if *Jesus* said these words, as the Bible tells us is the case, then it is surely fitting for us to ask our Creator for His help in understanding these teachings.

After all: Why would Jesus have said these things if we were not meant to understand them and apply them in our lives?

I CAN *so clearly remember reading the account in the 22nd chapter of Luke where Jesus withdrew from the disciples, prayed, and returned to find them fast asleep.*

Who, I wondered, could have possibly observed him praying ... and then related the incident so that it eventually could be included in the Gospel of Luke? There's another passage in the Gospels where Jesus supposedly includes the words 'let him who reads understand' in one of his spoken discourses, which seemed odd to me. And there was yet another spot where the New Testament author assured first-century Christians that their generation would see the second coming of the Messiah—a passage I found difficult to square with modern Christian doctrine. These and other queries about the New Testament arose while I was still quite young, certainly before I was fifteen. Had someone manipulated the Gospels? If so, who? And why?

I 'filed' my questions for later, and decided that the real problem was that I was not part of a vigorous Christian faith community.

FOUR:

Jesus and the Magicians

> *'It is not (possible) for any human being to whom God has given the Book and wisdom and prophethood to say to the people: 'Be my worshippers rather than God's.' On the contrary (he would say): 'Be devoted worshippers of your Lord, because you are teaching the Book, and you are studying it.' Nor would he order you to take angels and Prophets for lords. Would he order you to disbelieve after you have submitted to God's will?'* (QUR'AN 3:79-80)

WHO WAS JESUS? Or—if we prefer the present tense, as many do—who *is* he? What would Jesus have told us two millennia ago, what would he tell us today, about his ministry, his mission, his objectives, his identity? These are fateful questions, questions that challenge us.

If the Christian writer C.S. Lewis and the other mainstream scholars and theologians of Christianity are correct, Jesus would say to us, 'I am God Incarnate, the second person of the Trinity.'

Lewis supports this view of Jesus with words to this effect: 'Two thousand years ago, a man appeared among the Jews claiming to be God, a man whose words and deeds profoundly unsettled the religious authorities of his day, and whose mission continues to unsettle all of mankind. In evaluating this man's career, there are only two possibilities for us. We may consider him a lunatic, or we may consider him the Son of God. There is no middle ground. And who will maintain that Jesus was a lunatic?'

Now, I must be honest and admit that this line of argument has irritated me for many years … because it reminds me so much of a magician's performance.

ꝏ ꝏ ꝏ

Magicians, when they wish to make it appear to a paying audience that they have supernatural powers, often employ a series of careful misdirections: an unexpected flare from some flash powder, a pretty lady in a revealing gown, a loud noise from offstage, even something as simple as a gesture or a word. Magicians employ these misdirections, not for the sake

of simple showmanship, but with a purpose, and while holding a subtle goal in mind.

Consider, for instance, the case of a card magician. The aim is to *distract* an audience member who has been called up onto the stage for just a moment, just long enough to manipulate the deck, and then to move quickly enough to convince her that she has freely chosen a card on her own. In fact, however, the magician has 'forced' a predetermined card on her.

This is the magician's principle of misdirection.

Lewis engages in very similar sleight-of-hand with his 'lunatic-or-Son-of-God' argument, which appears in his book *Mere Christianity*.

Of course, there is no thoughtful, spiritually aware person—Christian or otherwise—who can read the Gospels with an open mind and an open heart, and come away from that experience convinced that Jesus was a lunatic. And so the believer finds herself holding a 'card' that she did not choose, a 'card' that has been forced upon her, a 'card' that informs her that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, the human component of the Trinity—as (she is assured) he himself claims to be.

The thoughtful Christians, however, must be prepared to appeal to the most authentic words of the Gospels to determine the truth or falsehood of such matters.

Once we resolve that much firmly in our hearts, we may find that we really are brave enough to pose the question for ourselves: Who is Jesus?

Does he say, 'I am the only begotten Son of God and the second person of the Trinity'? If we examine this fateful question carefully, we reach an extraordinary conclusion. We may look through the Gospels for as long as we please, but we will have a very difficult time indeed locating any verse in which Jesus says this.

❧❧❧

Now, Islam teaches that Jesus Christ forcefully *rejected* claims that he was divine. Most mainstream Christians who disagree with the teachings of Islam do so because of its emphatic insistence on this point.

We certainly have a right to be skeptical about Islam's claims about this issue. It is only fair for us to demand evidence *from the Gospels*, and not from any other source, before we conclude that Jesus rejected the divine role that so many believe he was born to play in human affairs.

So the question becomes: Can we find even *one* Gospel passage that plausibly suggests Jesus *rejected* today's prevailing understanding of his mission? Can we find a verse that shows him *denying* that he was the divine incarnation of God, the second person of the Trinity?

If we *cannot* find such a verse, then the discussion is over. Islam has failed to support its claims. If we *can* find such a verse, we are perhaps obliged to look a little more closely at what Islam has to say about Jesus.

We have, I think, both the right and the duty to determine whether or not Lewis, as he spreads out his deck of cards for us, is trying to distract us with his lunacy-or-divinity argument—and if he is, what he might be trying to distract us from. Misdirection is fine for entertainment, but it has, we must admit, no place when it comes to the important business of determining one's own path to salvation.

❦ ❦ ❦

Well. What *could* Lewis be eager to direct our attention away from?

Perhaps from Gospel passages like this one … in which Jesus explicitly denies any claim on divinity:

> **'And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.'** (MARK 10:17-18)

If Jesus was God, why in the world would he say something like this? Did he somehow forget that he himself was God when he uttered these words? (*A side note*—I had a discussion with a woman who assured me that this passage in Mark was not really in the Gospels, and who refused to believe that it appeared there until I gave her the chapter and verse number and she looked it up for herself!)

Have we ever gone to church and heard a homily or sermon exclusively devoted to Mark 10:18?

If our answer is 'no,' perhaps it is fair to ask *why* that is so … and to ask what other Gospel passages our magician may be attempting to distract our attention from.

Perhaps the magician would prefer to distract us from the italicized words that appear in the following Gospel passage … words with which Jesus makes clear that *all* of the truly faithful are (metaphorically speaking) Children of God:

> **'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.'** (MATTHEW 5:44-45)

Or perhaps the magician is eager to distract us from Gospel passages like this one … in which Jesus draws our attention *away* from reverence of him, and *towards* obedience to God Alone:

> **'And it came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.'** (LUKE 11:27-28)

Or perhaps we are meant to be distracted from this Gospel passage … in which Jesus reminds us that it is God Alone who forgives sinners:

> **'Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me. Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye**

> **from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.'** (MATTHEW 18:32-35)

In this parable, does Jesus say that *he himself* will deliver us over to the torturers if we do not forgive those who wrong us, after we ourselves have been forgiven?

Or does he say that *his heavenly Father*—our heavenly Father!—will deliver us over to the torturers if we choose to persist in this hypocrisy?

We are entitled to ask: Is this heavenly Father he speaks of the same as, or different than, the Father referenced elsewhere as the Father of *all* the faithful, the One who causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on all of us?

☙☙☙

To be sure, all these passages appear in the New Testament, and they are all easy enough to look up and consult. But if you have ever tried to engage members of the clergy in a discussion of these passages (as I have), you will find that a very interesting thing takes place when you try to talk about these passages. St. Paul keeps popping up.

You may begin by talking about the words of Jesus, but somehow you will always end up talking about the words of St. Paul. And this, I submit, is misdirection.

The faith Jesus preached was not Paulism, and no amount of legerdemain can possibly alter this fact.

ꟾ ꟾ ꟾ

We should not have to ask for any special permission to focus on the authentic words of Jesus, and *only* on the authentic words of Jesus. And if we are willing to focus *only* on the authentic words of Jesus, we may eventually conclude that they paint a picture of Jesus as a human Prophet, a picture that is startlingly similar to the picture offered in the Qur'an.

Christians around the world repeat the Lord's Prayer faithfully every day, attributing its exquisite words to Jesus himself. We are entitled to ask: Does this prayer require the faithful to appeal to Jesus himself? To the Trinity? To the Holy Spirit? Or does it require the faithful to appeal to '*our Father*'?

We are entitled to ask: To whom was Jesus praying when he spoke these words? Himself? Certainly not! And it is not 'my Father' that Jesus appeals to … but 'our Father.'

And we are entitled to ask: *Why* was he even speaking these words, if he himself was God?

ꟾ ꟾ ꟾ

In the end, our own honest answer to the question 'Who is Jesus?' need not be much more elaborate or

sophisticated than a simple 'I don't know.' That may very well be the best answer as we make our way through the Gospels. It's certainly not an answer to be ashamed of: 'I don't know.' And it is far better than answering as though the question we were facing were actually 'Who does St. Paul say Jesus is?'

The only answer that *is* worthy of shame, when we are asked 'Who is Jesus?' is the one that elevates the force of our own habit over the actual words of the Gospel. We may well face grave difficulties if we consciously choose to answer this question out of force of habit when we know better.

C.S. Lewis and the theologians of what is today known as mainstream Christianity may *want* us to answer that question out of force of habit, of course. They have their reasons. They have made their own choices. And they have arranged the deck as they see fit.

Whether we accept the card that has been extended, and then tell ourselves that we have chosen it freely, however, is up to us.

At eighteen*, I headed East for college and entered the Roman Catholic Church. In college, I met a beautiful and compassionate Catholic girl who was to become the great love and support of my life; she was not particularly religious, but she appreciated how important these matters were to me, and so she supported me in my beliefs. I do a great injustice to her seemingly limitless resources of strength, support, and love by compressing the beginning of our relationship into a few sentences here.*

❧❧❧

I asked the campus priest—a sweet and pious man—about some of the Gospel material that had given me trouble, but he became uncomfortable and changed the subject. On another occasion, I remember telling him that I was focusing closely on the Gospel of John because that Gospel was (as I thought then) a first-person account of the events in question.

Again, he stammered and changed the subject and did not want to discuss the merits of one Gospel over another; he simply insisted that all four were important and that I should study all of them.

This was a telling conversation, and a fateful one,
as it turned out.

FIVE:

The Problem of Illogicality

> *'Beware! Sincere true obedience is due to God alone!'* (QUR'AN 39:3)

IS GOD ILLOGICAL when it comes to dealing with humanity?

When pressed to explain some hard-to-grasp point of mainstream Christian doctrine—what the Trinity means, for instance, or whether Jesus really promised his followers that he would return to them during their lifetimes, or why an omnipotent God should require the sacrifice of a human being before delivering salvation to repentant sinners—some people have offered a particular, distinctive kind of answer. And their answer has to do with illogicality.

Human logic, the argument goes, can never expect to grasp divine logic—and this certainly seems hard to dispute. Yet the argument does not end there.

❦❦❦

Mainstream Christian teachings—such as the Trinitarian formulation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are complex and counterintuitive, we are told, *because* God Himself has, for His own reasons, created a reality that is strange, mysterious, and unpredictable. So it should not surprise us when His religion is strange, mysterious, and unpredictable.

Therefore, when we come across a component of the Christian faith that seems to us to contradict our own instinct, experience, or common sense, we must train ourselves to step back and accept this apparent illogicality as *evidence* of God's handiwork.

❦❦❦

When a thoughtful person ponders this explanation, he or she may at first wonder whether it is being offered seriously. But C.S. Lewis, the most respected Christian writer of the twentieth century, was a famous proponent of this view, and he certainly meant it seriously.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis briskly dismisses the complaints of those who find orthodox explanations of Christianity unsatisfying 'because simplicity is so beautiful, etc.' Then, Lewis suggests that such skeptical people have simply failed to notice

the true nature of things. 'Besides being complicated,' Lewis writes, 'reality, in my experience, is usually odd. It is not neat, not obvious, not what you expect … Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity. It is a religion you could not have guessed.' [C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins Edition 2001), p. 41]

Those are important words, and I hope you will consider them very closely.

Lewis really does want his hearers to join him in believing that any theological principle that appears disorganized, unclear, inconsistent, inaccurate, or logically indefensible is a reflection of the mysterious reality that surrounds us … and thus a reflection of God. Lewis was—and is—not alone in this belief.

Yet he does not continue his claim by saying that the *more* illogical and unpredictable a doctrine is, the *better* it reflects God. Why he shouldn't continue in this way, though, is not easy to say.

ꝏꝏꝏ

Please understand: When he makes this argument, Lewis is not advancing some radical claim that he himself has invented. *He is outlining a classic position of mainstream Christianity.*

Suppose we were to say to a dozen traditional theologians that the doctrine of the Trinity is hard for us to understand, and hard for us to explain to others. Suppose we were to ask those theologians for help in understanding and explaining the Trinity. *Each and every one* of them would explain to us, using some formulation or other, that *the very illogicality of the doctrine* is what identifies it as 'mysterious' as Godlike.

Consider the *Catholic Encyclopedia's* terse response to this all-important question. It says of the Trinity:

> 'A dogma so mysterious presupposes a Divine revelation.' (The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1912, Vol. 15, page 47)

And that, apparently, is that!

Well, suppose we were to press the matter? Suppose we were to demand to know, from those dozen traditional theologians, *why* three Gods are an essential component of a religion that aims to obey the First Commandment (which forbids worshipping anything other than God)? Suppose we were to demand some clearer understanding of *why* the Trinity should be so closely connected to the mission of Jesus? What should we expect to be told? Here is what the *Baltimore Catechism* tells us:

> 'It is there, and that is all. We see it and believe it, though we do not understand it. So if we refuse to believe everything we do not

> understand, we shall soon believe very little and make ourselves ridiculous.' (Baltimore Catechism, 2004, Catholic.net; Lesson 3: On the Unity and Trinity of God, Question 31)

I am afraid we must expect to be *ordered*—sometimes more tactfully than others, but always on essentially the same terms—*ordered* to believe whatever we do not understand about the Trinity, and to stop asking inconvenient questions.

This, we must understand, is the final message of the theologians: not to dig too deeply into the matter, not to inquire after details too closely. The theologians, if we press them, will say *something* along the following lines to us:

> 'This whole issue is a mystery. God is mysterious, and so is the world He has created, and so is His Triune nature. So please don't keep asking this question, because you are not entitled to a clear answer to it. The simple fact that the dogma is beyond our comprehension will have to do.'

If my version of the theologian's 'subtext' here sounds exaggerated to you, rest assured that it is only the tone that has been heightened. The logical content of what you just read is in fact the official response to questions that countless millions of Christians have been taught *not* to ask, among them:

'What is the historical origin of the Trinity?'

'Why must we believe in a Trinity, rather than, say, a Unity—or a Duology or a Quadrology?'

'Where in the Bible does Jesus mention the Trinity by that name?'

If you doubt what I am saying, all that is necessary for you to verify is for you to ask your pastor or priest the questions I have just posed.

Take careful note of the answers you receive, and then determine for yourself whether they conform to the outlines suggested in this chapter. At the end of the day, I believe you will find that you have been told, in one way or another, that the Trinity and its origin is a mystery, and that you must believe in it *because* it is a mystery.

You will also find that you have been told, *directly or indirectly*, to stop asking what verse in the Bible demonstrates Jesus' familiarity with the specific word 'Trinity'.

The answers you hear may be long. They may be short. They may be polite. They may be brusque. But they will, I believe, match the patterns set out here.

ꟹ ꟹ ꟹ

So that is what we read and hear a great deal about when we examine the difficult questions of Christianity:

its 'mysteries'. At this point, we must, I submit, have the courage to examine another under-examined 'mystery' about the Christian faith … and, what is more, we must summon the courage to take upon ourselves the responsibility for its resolution. The 'mystery' is this: Do the words of Jesus support Lewis and the others on this matter of illogicality and incomprehensibility somehow mysteriously reflecting God? Or do the words of Jesus contradict him on this point?

If we summon the courage to ask those questions, we may just discover that something important has in fact been overlooked in the discussion. Because the Jesus we encounter in the most ancient Gospel passages, for some strange reason, makes a point of emphasizing how *accessible* the Divine message is meant to be.

❧❧❧

> **'Ask—it will be given to you. Seek—you will find. Knock—it will be opened for you.'** (LUKE 11:9)
>
> **'Let the one who has ears listen!'** (LUKE 14:35)
>
> **'Get behind me, Satan: for it is written, 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.'** (LUKE 4:8)

> **'You, (God), have hidden these things from the wise and the learned … but revealed them to the untutored.'** (LUKE 10:21)
>
> **'You scholarly experts—damn you! You have hidden the key of knowledge. You yourself haven't entered, and you have stood in the way of those who want to get in.'** (LUKE 11:52)

ℬ ℬ ℬ

Are these verses really the words of a man who believes that the core religious principles of his faith are divine *because* they are hard to understand?

Are these really the words of a man who is preaching that God is both three and one simultaneously?

Are these really the words of a man who believes his mission is rooted in mystery?

How can we possibly reconcile these verses with Lewis' description of Christianity—as 'a religion you could not have guessed'? What is unguessable or mysterious about these words?

The verses seem to me to suggest quite the contrary of Lewis' suggestion: that Jesus is trying to get us to pay attention to something of fundamental importance, something singular and utterly impossible to ignore. This 'something' is, at least, impossible to ignore for those who open their eyes, open their ears,

humble their hearts, and avoid anything remotely resembling spiritual arrogance, as he instructs. There are, as we have seen, two paths.

> **'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'** (MATTHEW 5:3)

> **'Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.'** (LUKE 6:25)

His command to us is not that we believe, obediently, something we could not have guessed. Instead, he challenges us to choose which path we are going to walk: that which leads to the Kingdom of God, or that which leads to weeping and grieving.

❧ ❧ ❧

Islam holds that God Himself is beyond human comprehension. Islam insists that His revelations could very easily consume a lifetime's study. But the central facts of the believer's relationship with God—that He is unambiguously One, that he demands heartfelt repentance and obedience from human beings, that He alone is worthy of worship—are, in Islam, so simple as to defy misrepresentation.

The *accessibility* of these essential facts to a humble heart is, in the early Gospel verses as in Islam, a given.

The willingness of a 'great thinker' to respond to the Divine message is another question. God, we are told in Q, has hidden knowledge from those who claim high status and wisdom … and has granted His guidance to 'the untutored.'

ℬ ℬ ℬ

If we look closely at the early Gospel passages, we will have a difficult time persuading ourselves that Jesus' aim is to preach something mysterious, difficult, or illogical. Yet Lewis and the others insist that the true faith *is* mysterious, difficult, and illogical—something 'you could not have guessed.'

Jesus warns people frankly to repent their disobedience to the One God:

> **'Woe unto you, Chorazin! Woe unto you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works that had been done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be better for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than it will be for you.'** (LUKE 10:13)

He warns people to fear God alone:

'And I tell you, my friends: Don't be afraid of people who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will tell you the person you ought to fear! Fear the one who, after He has killed, has the power to cast into hell. Yes; I am telling you, fear Him!' (LUKE 12:5)

He warns people to stop worshipping that which has been created:

'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.' (MATTHEW 6:19-20)

He insists, with peculiar intensity, that people should make every possible effort to attend to the business of fulfilling the will of the Creator *while there is still time to do so*:

'Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.' (LUKE 9:62)

Not once, however, does Jesus warn people, as C.S. Lewis does, to repent their failure to embrace the doctrine of the Trinity.

❧ ❧ ❧

Now, these sayings of Jesus are simple, and momentous, instructions. *But they are not mysteries, and nothing an honest man or woman who could do them can possibly turn them into mysteries.* And this is where Lewis and the others lead us astray.

Indeed, for those people who would formulate mysteries where none actually exist, the Jesus we hear in the earliest verses of the Gospel has nothing but contempt.

> **'You scholarly experts—damn you! You have hidden the key of knowledge. You yourself haven't entered, and you have stood in the way of those who want to get in.'** (LUKE 11:52)

That *sweet campus priest eventually married my girlfriend and me, and we settled in suburban Massachusetts. We each moved ahead professionally and became grownups. We had three beautiful children. And I kept reading and rereading the Bible. I was drawn, as ever, to the sayings about the lamp and the eye, the Prodigal Son, the Beatitudes, the importance of prayer, and so many others—but I had steadily more serious intellectual problems with the surrounding 'architecture' of the New Testament, particularly with the Apostle Paul.*

Was it Christianity I was following?
Or was it Paulism?

In the mid-1990s, my wife and I both became deeply disenchanted with the Catholic Church, in part because of a truly terrible priest who gave very little attention to the spiritual needs of his community. We later learned that he had been covering up for a child abuser.

SIX:

The Mechanics of Salvation

> *'God will bring all things (to view), whether they are as small as a mustard seed or (high) in the heavens or (buried deep) in the earth. God is well aware of all things, to their tiniest details.'* (QUR'AN 31:16)

IN THE BIBLE I bought for myself when I decided to accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior back in 1974 (I was thirteen), there is written, in my young hand, a slogan I may have heard from a pulpit in those days, or read in a tract somewhere. It reads:

'Jesus didn't come to help you get it together.
He came to get it together for you.'

Whoever came up with it, the basic idea is still valid for most Christians, even if the tone feels a bit dated now. This saying is, in fact, the essence of main-

stream Christianity. Certainly it is the essence of Lewis' Christianity.

The basic idea behind the saying is that the mechanics of salvation are extremely simple, featuring only one 'moving part', acceptance of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as savior. This is what I believed as an adolescent, and this is what the majority in contemporary Christianity believe today.

Here are just a few examples of prominent Christians through the centuries who have said precisely the same thing, using different words:

> ***'But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'***
> —ST. PAUL (ROMANS 5:8)

> ***'Jesus, whom I know as my Redeemer, cannot be less than God.'***
> —ST. ATHANASIUS

> ***'As Man alone, Jesus could not have saved us; as God alone, he would not; Incarnate, he could and did.'***
> —MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

> ***'I have a great need for Christ; I have a great Christ for my need.'***

—CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

These are just a few of the hundreds of examples one could supply of this type of teaching. It is the core of contemporary Christian doctrine.

Now if salvation really is this simple—if it really does have only one moving part—then there is certainly a huge advantage for the Christians who are saved in this way. They can leave (as it were) all the driving to Jesus.

The thoughtful Christian, however, is entitled to ask a question about all this. This person is entitled to ask *whether Jesus himself* embraced the view that he did not come to help us 'get it together,' but rather to 'get it together for us.'

❧❧❧

It can be quite difficult to ask such a question, either privately or in public. Force of habit and social conformity can be such very strong forces! Most Christians have been conditioned—perhaps from their parents, perhaps from years of observing how churchgoing people behave, perhaps from a combination of the two—*not* to ask such questions.

We may even have been conditioned to believe that posing such questions would make us 'bad Christians'.

Yet we have to ask these questions. And here is why:

If we withdraw obediently when someone discourages us from exploring what Jesus actually taught about human salvation—and if we then live our lives under this code of obedient withdrawal, then I am afraid Christianity as a creed is pretty much meaningless for us. This variety of 'Christianity' asks us to accept Jesus as a Savior, as a Son of the Omnipotent, All-Knowing God, but forbids us to compare his actual teachings with those of the religion that bears his name.

Now, if this is not a perversion of Jesus' mission, then nothing is a perversion of that mission.

After all, these are teachings that must, by the faith's own definition, be divine in nature! Surely we are entitled, and obliged, to study them very closely indeed.

So please … if you consider nothing else that I have suggested in this book, please … please do take a moment to consider the following two sentences closely before proceeding any further. What we are about to discuss here are *the preserved teachings of Jesus Christ* on the subject of human salvation—not the teachings of St. Paul, or St. Thomas Aquinas, or Thomas à Kempis, or Malcolm Muggeridge, or the Pope, or Franklin Graham. The teachings of Jesus, by definition, *must* matter to Christians.

☙☙☙

Consider. What if we *were* to find something in the earliest, most historically relevant teachings of Jesus that showed us clearly how *he* envisioned the mechanics of salvation? If we were to encounter such information, what would our attitude toward the opinions of St. Paul, St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomas à Kempis, the Pope, Malcolm Muggeridge, or Franklin Graham have to be? For a true Christian, the answer is obvious. What those men all had to say about salvation *would simply have to wait* for a moment.

All of them, every single one, would have to wait while we listened to Jesus.

Anyone who believes otherwise simply cannot claim to be a Christian in any meaningful sense of the word.

> So: *Did* Jesus embrace the view that he did not come to 'help us get it together,' but rather to 'get it together for us'?
>
> Or did he leave us other instructions?

☙☙☙

> **'Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in**

thereat. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.' (MATTHEW 7:13-14)

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

If Jesus did advocate what I wrote in the front of my Bible, the view that he came to 'get it together for us,' it is odd that he should place such heavy emphasis, as Islam does, on the fateful consequences of the choices *we make as individuals* as we travel the road of our life. It is these choices, he assures us, which will determine our salvation. It is simply not possible for any intelligent person to misinterpret his meaning here.

After we read these words, a question appears. What, specifically, is 'narrow' about the act of accepting Jesus Christ as one's personal savior?

Isn't the act of accepting Jesus Christ as savior a comparatively simple, straightforward decision, one that has been engaged in by hundreds upon hundreds of millions of people down the centuries? What is difficult or rare about that choice?

Why does Jesus agree with the doctrines of Islam by telling us that the path to destruction is wide and easy to travel, but the path to salvation is much more challenging? Once Jesus has 'gotten it together' for us, and we have accepted him as our savior, is the

traveling of this narrow path he speaks of still a requirement for salvation?

If so, doesn't that mean the mechanics of salvation may be different than we might at first have believed, that it may have more than one moving part?

If not, *why does Jesus mention this path at all?*

ꟹ ꟹ ꟹ

'When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.' (MATTHEW 12:43-45)

ꟹ ꟹ ꟹ

If Jesus did embrace the view that he came to 'get it together for us,' it is hard to understand why he is so keen for us to grasp, as Islam is keen for us to grasp, the vital importance of our maintaining a constant guard against negative forces. These, it is clear, are

forces that may rush into the mind and soul of *even someone who has sincerely repented and believed.*

Once Jesus has 'gotten it together for us,' and we have accepted him as our savior, we are, apparently, still subject to being defiled by these forces—in a way that leaves our last state worst than our first, and our very souls in grave peril.

If our 'last state' is worse than our 'first,' we are clearly headed for Hell.

Doesn't that mean that the mechanics of salvation may be different than we might at first have believed, and may have more than one moving part?

If salvation has only one moving part, *why does Jesus mention this danger at all?*

❦❦❦

> **'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven—only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.'** (MATTHEW 7:21)

❦❦❦

This is an odd teaching indeed for a religion built around the principle of acknowledging that Jesus Christ is Lord.

If Jesus did embrace the view that his role was to 'get it together for us,' it is hard to see why he would

tell us, in the plainest possible words, that simply appealing to him as lord is, on its own, not enough to win us salvation. And exactly how different is this kind of appeal, which Jesus clearly regards as insufficient, from the act of proclaiming him one's personal savior?

Once Jesus has gotten it together for us, and we have accepted him as our savior, is his command to perform the will of God in order to attain salvation still binding upon us?

If we fail to do the will of his Father in heaven, is our salvation imperiled?

If it is, doesn't that mean that the mechanics of salvation may be different than we might at first have believed, and have more than one moving part?

If it isn't, why does Jesus mention this requirement, and *not* mention, at a time when it would be perfectly appropriate to do so, his own soul-saving role as the only begotten Son of God? Why does he choose instead to emphasize so very strongly the necessity of obeying the will of Almighty God?

❧ ❧ ❧

The central reality of Christianity, we are told, is that Jesus Christ died to redeem humanity, thereby giving those who believe in him a fresh start with the Almighty.

Suppose we were to ask: Why should we need a fresh start in the first place? C.S. Lewis, and a great many who agree with him, would offer this answer: 'Humanity has fallen from grace and is, as a result, inherently sinful. The only thing that can reverse such a fall is the blood of Jesus Christ.'

If they are right, then we have found the answer to the all-important question of eternal salvation.

If they are right, we have encountered a momentous and important piece of information, certainly a piece of information that should be of interest to every human being on earth.

If they are right, we have a responsibility to try to share this information, this Good News, with every member of the human family.

Before we accept such a responsibility, however, we have the right, and the duty, to ask the question that is somehow always neglected: *Do the words that the Gospels attribute to Jesus support this theory?*

❦❦❦

> **'Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the ad-versary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge de-liver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till**

thou hast paid the ut-termost farthing.' (MATTHEW 5:25-26)

ℬℬℬ

Can this parable of Jesus, so rarely taught or analyzed in church congregations, be understood as anything other than a parable of salvation and damnation?

Can 'prison' represent anything other than Hell?

Can the 'judge' represent anyone other than God?

Can the 'adversary' who may hand us over to the judge 'at any moment' be anything other than our own inevitable death?

Is it really the blood of the crucified Jesus that saves us while we are on our way to court?

Or … is what saves us *our own choice to come to terms with the adversary?*

In this parable of Jesus, salvation lies in our decision to acknowledge the reality of our own impending death, our willingness to 'settle' our case before the judge renders a binding decision that we know we will not enjoy. What saves us is our own eagerness to 'pay up' by repenting and doing good deeds in this life, thus avoiding punishment in the next. What saves us is our own conclusion that we had better accept the 'terms' we are being offered, submit to the hard facts of the situation, and strike the best deal we can *before we get to 'court'*.

This pragmatic submission to the Reality of the situation we all face is, as it turns out, the guiding theological principle of Islam. And it is, to the careful reader of Q, Jesus' guiding theological principle, as well.

We have a right, and a duty, to ask: Where, within this parable, are we told of the atoning action of the blood of the Son of God?

We have a right, and a duty, to ask: If Jesus shared a parable of salvation with us, and left out the part about his own sacrifice for mankind, is the problem with Jesus … or is the problem with our theory of his sacrifice for mankind?

❧❧❧

We cannot seriously maintain that it is simple 'coincidence' that Jesus fails to mention the atoning action of the blood of the Son of God in any of these sayings.

Nor can we regard as 'coincidence' the stark and disorienting fact that not a single word promoting the theology of redemption in Christ's sacrifice appears in any of the most ancient Gospel verses.

Instead, in Q, we hear Jesus *rebuking* Satan when Satan tests him by referring to him as God's son.

In Q, we hear Jesus forecasting the doom of people who listen to his instructions for living and fail to take

action on them. If he meant to forecast the doom of those who fail to accept his sacrifice for mankind, surely he would have done so!

In Q, we hear Jesus refer to himself as the Son of Adam—not at all the same thing as being the only begotten Son of God.

These facts cannot be accidents. They cannot be coincidences. They cannot be happenstance.

The early evidence is quite clear. Notions of Jesus' sacrifice and his ransom for all mankind of a human being who was God Incarnate *simply were not part of the earliest Gospel.* These concepts were added later, long after the conclusion of Jesus' ministry.

❧❧❧

If we read the earliest Gospel verses with both a functioning heart and a functioning mind, we cannot honestly say to ourselves that Jesus really saw his own mission as that of 'getting it together for us.'

We must instead conclude that he was much more interested in finding ways to get *us* to guard against evil—to get *us* to choose to turn over and over again to God—to get *us* to commit ourselves to discerning and submitting to God's will—to get *us* to listen to our own soul's advice—to get *us* to purify *ourselves* under the guidance of Almighty God—to get *us* to repent our sins before we are brought before the Judge.

❧❧❧

'Without Jesus' sacrificial death,' a contemporary American pastor preached recently, 'there would be no Christianity.'

His words echo the sentiments of C.S. Lewis and the vast majority of Christian clergy and theologians. If Chadwell and all the rest of these people are correct, then the clear Gospel instructions for salvation that you have read in this chapter—instructions have nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus' sacrificial death—presumably belong to some other faith. If the experts insist that these teachings have no place in Christianity, then they may be sure that these teachings are entirely in keeping with Islam.

If we are true Christians, we must accept as authoritative what Jesus actually taught about salvation.

And if we are truly interested in what Jesus actually taught on this subject, we cannot escape noticing that his message is a great deal like—is, in fact, identical to—what Islam teaches.

❧❧❧

Eventually *I found it necessary to immerse myself in a faith community. I joined, and became active in the local Protestant denomination, a Congregational Church.*

I led Sunday School classes for children, and briefly taught a Gospel class on the Parables for the adults. In the Sunday School classes for the kids, I stayed right with the curriculum I had been given; but in the adult class, I tried to challenge the participants to confront certain parables directly, without filtering everything through the Apostle Paul. We had interesting discussions, but I sensed some resistance, and I didn't try to teach an adult class again. My wife eventually joined my church. (She is a member there today.)

SEVEN:

What about Paul?

> ***'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.'***
> —THE APOSTLE PAUL (ROMANS 4:23-24)

> ***'Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'***
> —THE APOSTLE PAUL (COLOSSIANS 1:12-14)

WHEN I DISCUSS Jesus with mainstream Christians, some questions tend to come up again and again. The most common questions sound something like this:

'What about St. Paul? What about all the other great Christian thinkers and theologians and scholars who have labored down the centuries and developed great systems of thought and great systems of philosophy around accepted Christian theology? Doesn't their work revolve around the idea of Jesus being the only begotten Son of God and the sacrifice for mankind? Aren't you ignoring them?'

Not at all. It is quite impossible to ignore Paul, because he is a gifted rhetorician and a theologian of extraordinary and enduring influence. It is equally impossible, however, for a thoughtful Christian to obey Paul if Paul is at odds with Jesus.

Mainstream Christianity, following Paul, does in fact tell us that there is a Natural Law (also known as a Moral Law)—an inherent law of wrong and right that the vast majority of human beings can perceive plainly, and that they want, deep down, to follow. Mainstream Christianity tells us that there is a Law reflecting the Divine, a Law that humans cannot possibly expect to obey properly without the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. It is *because* we are sinful, *because* we cannot expect to fulfill the demands upon us, we are told, that we come short of the glory of God. This is Paul's position, and the position at which mainstream Christian theology begins.

Yet even though we understand what Paul is saying, we must also understand what Jesus is saying.

Jesus has, as we have seen in Chapter Three, a much deeper and richer conception of human moral perception than Paul and the other Christian theologians do.

Jesus explicitly rejects, as we have seen in Chapter Five, his own claims on divinity. He is clearly a prophet (that is, a messenger from God); he is not himself God, and he says so.

Jesus maintains, as we have seen in Chapter Six, that complete submission to the will of God, before death overtakes us and we are held accountable for our sins, is the criterion for salvation.

And we may rest assured that whether we are ready now or not to admit this fact to ourselves, or discuss it with others, we will ultimately be held accountable for what we know, and what we choose to ignore, about the teachings of Jesus.

❧ ❧ ❧

So let us suppose that Paul tells us—just as C.S. Lewis and a thousand other great Christian thinkers tell us—that you and I can never, no matter how hard we may try, live up to the demands of the Natural Law that God has placed within our hearts.

Let us suppose that Paul and a thousand other great thinkers tell us that God Himself became a hu-

man being in order to make it possible for us to have those demands met on our behalf.

Even if Paul and a thousand other great thinkers warn us that we are lost if we do not conform our minds to their notions of salvation …

Even if Paul and the others insist on all of this, *we are bound to listen to Jesus.*

ൿൿൿ

Jesus overrules Paul, and there simply cannot be any dispute on this point … except from people who reject Jesus. This fact has been systematically ignored—and/or purposefully obscured—for two thousand years. So I hope you will forgive me for repeating it here.

What Paul and the others say to us is intriguing and (potentially) very important. However, if we do not grant Jesus Christ the final word on matters of ultimate importance, we must take a moment to ask ourselves exactly what kind of Christians we are. Do we follow men? Or do we follow Christ?

ൿൿൿ

It is imperative that we make a conscious effort to compare the world view that Jesus presents with the world view that Paul and the others present. We cannot assume that the two world views are identical

simply because we have been raised to believe they are identical. In fact, they are not identical.

The mere fact that our fathers, mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers (and anyone else who came before them) believed something to be the case does not make it so. Jesus and Paul do in fact offer very different world views, even if our parents and grandparents did not notice this.

And if the world view of Paul is in conflict with the world view of Jesus … then Jesus must be granted priority, whether or not that priority is popular.

ꝏ ꝏ ꝏ

> **'(Jesus) said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he answering said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered correctly: do this, and you shall live.'** (LUKE 10:26-28)

ꝏ ꝏ ꝏ

Imagine Paul to be correct. Suppose the love of God, love so strong that it amounts to complete submission, is not enough to secure salvation. Suppose there *were*

another requirement for spiritual success than the one mentioned in the Gospel passage above.

Imagine that salvation *did* demand **'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'** (ROMANS 4:24), **'redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'** (COLOSSIANS 1:14)

Imagine salvation *did* require God Himself to take human form and shed His blood in order to forgive our sins and make eternal life possible for us.

Why in the world would Jesus, when answering his questioner in the passage above, fail to mention this fact?

Jesus makes it abundantly clear: the young man has answered correctly!

If the young man had *not* answered correctly, and had left out the part about the blood and the sacrifice and God taking human form … would Jesus have said, **'You have answered correctly: do this and you shall live'**?

❧ ❧ ❧

So. What about Paul?

The problem is not, cannot be, that Jesus is not listening closely enough to Paul.

The problem must therefore be that Paul is not listening closely enough to Jesus.

The *more research I put into the subject of the early history of the Gospels, the more I found myself thinking of that conversation about the Gospel of John with my priest. I realized that what he had been unwilling or unable to tell me was that the author(s) of the Gospel of John had been lying. This was manifestly not an eyewitness account, though it claimed to be.*

I was in a strange situation. I was certainly enjoying the fellowship of the Christians at my church, who were all committed and prayerful people. Being part of a religious community was important to me. Yet I had deep intellectual misgivings about the supposed historicity of the Gospel narratives. What's more, I was, more and more undeniably, getting a starkly different message from the Gospel sayings of Jesus than that which my fellow Christians were apparently getting.

There came a point at which I was fascinated by the apparent intersection of the Christian mystic tradition and that of the Sufis and the Zen Buddhists. And I had even written on such matters. But there seemed to be no one at my church who shared my zeal for these issues.

In particular, I was interested in the research being done that indicated that the oldest strata of the Gospels reflected an extremely early source known as Q, and that each of the individual sayings of Jesus within it needed to be evaluated on its own merits, and not as part of the narrative material that surrounded it. The narrative material, I learned—material accounted for, among other things, the crucifixion narratives that form the core of conventional Christian theology—was in fact added many years later. I started focusing much more closely on these verses, and using them as a criterion by which to evaluate those parts of the New Testament that had for years seemed cold and foreign to me.

EIGHT:

Context

> *'My Lord! Relieve my mind, and make my task easy for me, and untie my tongue, that they may understand what I say.'* (QUR'AN 20:25-28)

'YOU HAVE NOT,' IT MAY BE OBJECTED, 'given us the context of all these sayings. You have only quoted very short passages of scripture. You are deliberately omitting key portions of the Gospel message in order to mislead people.'

This is another common reaction from Christians to the points I have raised here.

In fact, it may be the most common justification for turning away from the approach discussed in this book. The argument is that one Gospel verse is simply not complete without connection to, or comparison with, another Gospel verse.

It is extremely important for us to understand, then, that this argument arises from a deeply flawed understanding of the way the Gospels were written.

❧❧❧

The best (non-Muslim!) Biblical scholars in the world now agree: *Before there was a story of Jesus, there were Gospels.*

The best (non-Muslim!) Biblical scholars in the world now agree that the individual Gospel sayings I am citing here must stand, and be interpreted, independently.

The original sayings of Jesus were not 'hard-wired' to other verses, as we may have been taught, and they are certainly not 'hard-wired' to the later writings of the Apostle Paul.

❧❧❧

It is not necessary for you to take my word on the matter to resolve this extremely important issue for yourself.

We are talking about a central finding of modern New Testament research. We are talking about a finding that is quite clear for anyone willing to take a moment appeal to the scholarship … and not even recent scholarship, but the scholarship of six or seven decades ago. We are talking, at this point, not about

whether Islam agrees with Christianity, but about the objective facts of contemporary textual analysis of the Gospels.

Here is the proof.

- 'It is one of the points made by recent criticism that the characteristic method of Gospel compilation was just this artless collocation of originally independent units, and that the more effort after continuity there is, the more advanced is the stage of development from the original tradition.'—'A New Gospel,' C.H. Dodd, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (1936), reprinted in *New Testament Studies*, (Scribners, New York, 1956), p. 12-52.

The more comprehensible the narrative is—the *further removed* the Gospel passage in question is from the original tradition, from the 'originally independent' units. The more artful the narrative is, the *less authentic* a given account is likely to be.

So if someone insists that we must 'interpret' (for instance) Jesus' description of the requirements of salvation in Matthew 5:25-26 by first reminding ourselves that such a verse cannot be 'understood properly' without recourse to some other Gospel verse or story …

… that person is—from the viewpoint of modern scholarship—simply mistaken.

Actually, we must begin by asking ourselves what such a passage means *when viewed as a single unit.* We cannot assume that it was *originally* composed as part of some larger narrative whole. It was not.

☙☙☙

To make this point in public is to be considered, in some quarters, a 'bad Christian'.

Yet is it really 'good Christianity' to ignore the painstaking Biblical scholarship of the past century? Surely one does not become a 'better' Christian by obediently closing one's eyes to facts when ordered to do so.

We now know that we draw closer to the historical Jesus when we evaluate ancient Gospel sayings independently, without the benefit of narrative continuity … because that is how they were originally collected. Rather than pretend this important fact does not exist, we must *use* this fact to gain a greater understanding of the original Gospel message.

☙☙☙

Whether it is popular for us to say so or not, whether our priest or pastor wants to admit it in front of the congregation or not, whether raising the fact is

convenient to our loved ones or not, the very first Gospels were collections of Jesus' sayings. They were not stories.

These early Gospels largely *avoided* storytelling. They simply reported what Jesus said at various points during his ministry. Early believers remembered individual sayings of or brief exchanges with Jesus, and shared them with each other in conversation, then memorized them. This oral tradition eventually became a written tradition.

As thoughtful Christians, we should, of course, be interested in what Jesus actually said. I hope you will agree that if someone claims to be a Christian, but is *not* interested in what Jesus said, that is a very strange variety of Christianity indeed!

And so we should be interested in determining which sayings were in fact contained in those earliest Gospels.

❧ ❧ ❧

The creation of the *later* Gospels—including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—was not, as we may have been taught, a matter of someone 'starting from scratch' or writing under the spontaneous 'inspiration' of God. Rather, these traditional Gospels came about through the careful drawing together and amplifying of various existing traditions. The individual sayings were

gathered into discourses, and, eventually, surrounded by narrative material—by a story.

This means that, when we consider the authenticity of the various Gospel sayings in Q, the *smallest* possible unit of the text is often the most important. The 'explanatory' or 'story' material that may surround that small unit of text, when it shows up in the traditional Gospels we have today, is, by definition, somewhat suspicious. Why? Because all the narrative material within the Gospels is, by definition, of later origin than the brief sayings that were memorized and transmitted orally by the first believers.

❧❧❧

Even if it is difficult to do, we must learn to *look past* the 'story' of the Gospels, and focus intently on the individual sayings themselves, if we wish to understand Jesus' actual mission.

We have, however, been taught by religious authorities for most of our lives to *accept* the narrative material that surrounds a Gospel saying as undisputable truth, or even as historical reality. If a certain passage says that Jesus said such and such in order to explain thus and so, then that (we have been taught) is how it must have taken place. But if God gave us the Gospels, as He did, He also gave us

minds—and we should hold as self-evident that He wants us to use both of them.

❧❧❧

Once we look past the narratives, we may focus directly on what remains of the memorized versions of the early individual sayings of Jesus. Refusing to do this is not a sign of faith, but rather a sign of obedience, and the two are not identical.

Fortunately, the earliest versions of these sayings appear to have been preserved for us in Q. How accurately they have been preserved, we will never know. But they are there. And they are earlier than what surrounds them.

That is why I have only quoted very short Gospel passages in this book, and avoided cross-referencing them to other Gospel passages.

❧❧❧

At this point, I often hear the following: 'What you say about the scholarship and the textual development of the Gospels seems interesting. But still somehow, I cannot escape the feeling that the texts in questions have been manhandled.'

And this is true. They *do* appear to have been manhandled. But it is not modern scholars who have been doing the manhandling.

To explain what I mean, I must give you some background information … and apologize in advance to you. I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity in my life to study the world's religions fairly closely. Some historical patterns in the development of religious culture are impossible to ignore, and I am about to share a few of them with you now—but I want to say ahead of my time that it is not my intention to denigrate anyone's faith or to attack any person's conception of God. My intent is only to call attention to the simple facts of history, facts that may be confirmed by consulting any good encyclopedia or responsible textbook on comparative religion. If we study these facts, we may be able to come to some conclusions about how the real manhandling of the message of Jesus took place.

Consider that …

- Many faith movements from before Christianity promoted the idea that the suffering and death of someone else makes salvation possible.
- Long before Jesus, the god Attis, in Phrygia (contemporary Turkey) was regarded as the only begotten son of God and the savior of mankind. On March 24th of each year, he supposedly bled to death at the foot of a pine tree. His blood was believed to bring forth new

life from the earth. *Each spring, his worshippers celebrated his triumphant rising from the dead.*

- Long before Jesus, the god Abonis of Syria was regarded by his followers as having *died to attain redemption for all mankind. Each spring, his worshippers celebrated his triumphant rising from the dead.*
- Long before Jesus, followers of the Egyptian god Osiris *celebrated, each spring, his triumphant rising from the dead.* They also celebrated his birthday—on December 29th.
- Long before Jesus, the Greek demigod Dionysius was regarded as the son of Zeus. His followers celebrated his *triumphant rising from the dead at the spring equinox. His Roman incarnation, Bacchus, had a familiar birthday: December 25th.*
- Long before Jesus, followers of Mithra, the Persian sun-god, celebrated *his* birthday on *December 25th.* Their religious rituals included a Eucharistic supper at which believers participated in Mithra's divine nature *by means of a holy meal of bread and wine.*

C.S. Lewis makes (understandably) brief reference to these traditions in *Mere Christianity*. He does so as part of a sweeping historical survey of human religious experience. Rather than offer his readers the specifics of these faith systems—specifics that I have just shared

with you—Lewis tells us that these movements were precursor faiths to Christianity: rough drafts, if you will, of humanity's eventual attempt to bring itself closer to the (as-yet-unborn) Jesus Christ.

This is either supreme intellectual laziness or deliberate deception. And Lewis's was not a lazy mind.

So let us acknowledge the facts. The pagan constituencies played a major role not only in the development of the Gospels, but also in the later theological doctrines, rituals, and sensibilities of the Christian Church. These influences betrayed the original message of Jesus.

The influences of those pagan groups, fortunately, appear to be *entirely absent* from the early Gospel passages we find in Q. And that is why I pay such close attention to them, and to the rigorously monotheistic pattern of worship they outline—and why I believe you should, too.

❧❧❧

We have been looking at the 'context' supplied by human religious history *before* Jesus. Religious history *after* Jesus' ministry, however, is just as revealing. This, too, is a source of 'context'. Of particular importance is this fact:

> The doctrine of the Trinity was formally imposed upon Christianity over three centuries after the birth of Jesus, by the Roman Emperor Constantine.

At the Council of Nicea in 325 came the first formal approval of the doctrine that God was 'triune' in nature, a move that paved the way for the ruthless persecution of those who rejected this doctrine. The Council was summoned by the Emperor, and not by any religious figure within the Christian community, a fact that sheds some insight on the political importance of this event.

Constantine did not invent the Trinity, but he had some distinctly earthbound reasons for backing the three-in-one formulation, chief among them unity in his kingdom. As one resource puts it:

> 'As it exists today the doctrine (of the Trinity) developed over the centuries as a result of many controversies … These controversies were for most purposes settled at the Ecumenical Councils, whose creeds affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. Constantine the Great, (who called) the first council in 325 AD, arguably had political motives for settling the issue, rather than religious reasons.'
> [*Source:* Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org)]

Those groups who dared to disagree with the emperor's formulation were quickly labeled heretics and, eventually, exiled or eradicated.

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

What kind of man was this Constantine, this ruler who played such a fateful role in the global development of Christianity? I am afraid the image he presents in history is not a particularly flattering one … if we are willing to look beyond the careful euphemisms of his traditional biographers.

Constantine was a genocidal tyrant who used violence on the large and small scale to pursue his (sometimes mysterious) objectives. He murdered his own son and wife for reasons no one has been able to piece together; he slaughtered literally thousands of political opponents; he was known to be an enthusiastic fire worshipper. And he was baptized as a Christian only on his deathbed. And yet, regardless of how deeply his own personal commitment to the faith went (or didn't), this ruthless, pragmatic, and possibly sociopathic head of state was, after Christ himself and the Apostle Paul, probably the most influential man in the history of the faith.

This fact is worthy of close consideration by every follower of Jesus.

The case can be made, in fact, that Constantine outranks both Jesus and Paul in influence. It is Constantine's Nicene formulation of the Trinity that has governed, in a determining way, most Christian theology for the past seventeen centuries. Many people today act as though this historical reality is as natural an outgrowth of the mission of Jesus as the rain falling and the grass growing. It is not.

Anyone who maintains that the Gospels themselves support Constantine's brand of orthodoxy must confront an awkward question: How are we to account for the fact that *no one preached the Nicene formulation before the time of Constantine?*

No responsible historian of Christianity disputes the stark and enduring changes in Christian theology that took place in the centuries following Jesus.

These changes did not spring from thin air. Rather, they culminated in Constantine's council. They carried distinct political benefits for the Emperor's regime. And they are simply impossible for a modern, thoughtful Christian to come to terms with without accepting at least the possibility of apostasy—that is, formal betrayal of the theology Jesus himself followed, the theology of total submission to the One Creator God.

❧ ❧ ❧

The remarkable thing is that so much of that original theology is still evident in the earliest Gospel verses. Look at the teachings we find in Q ... and ask yourself how closely they match the 'context' of Constantine.

In Q, Jesus warns us to fear only the judgment of a single God:

> **'And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.'** (LUKE 12:4-5)

This is identical to the Islamic principle known as *Taqwa.* Compare:

> 'To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. God's retribution is severe. Should you then have fear of anyone other than God?' (QUR'AN 16:52)

In Q, Jesus warns humanity plainly that earthly advantages and pleasures should not be the goal of our lives:

> **'But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that**

are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.' (LUKE 6:24-5)

This is identical to Islam's warning that we must not be fooled by the allures of *Dunya,* or earthly life. Compare:

'The desire to have increase of worldly gains has preoccupied you so much (that you have neglected the obligation of remembering God)—until you come to your graves! You shall know. You shall certainly know (about the consequences of your deeds). You will certainly have the knowledge of your deeds beyond all doubt. You will be shown hell, and you will see it with your own eyes. Then, on that day, you shall be questioned about the bounties (of God).' (QUR'AN 102:1-8)

Perhaps just as revealing, Q teaches nothing whatsoever of the Crucifixion, or of the sacrificial nature of the mission of Jesus ... an intriguing omission indeed! And consider the following chilling words:

'And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the

> **kingdom of heaven. But those who believe they own the kingdom of heaven shall be cast out into the outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'** (MATTHEW 8:11-12)

ꕤ ꕤ ꕤ

There is context … and there is betrayal. Each of us must decide for ourselves which is which.

Those of us who are unwilling to accept the pagan remnants of Constantine as the permanent foundation of our religious faith may, as our detractors claim, not be 'real Christians'.

Then again … one never knows. We may be.

The *more I looked at the Q sayings, the more impossible it became for me to reconcile the notion of the Trinity with that which seemed most authentic to me in the Gospels. I found myself face-to-face with some very difficult questions:*

- *Where in the Gospels did Jesus use the word 'Trinity'?*
- *If Jesus was God, as the doctrine of the Trinity claims, why did he worship God?*
- *If Jesus was God, as the doctrine of the Trinity claims, to whom was he praying, and why?*

The more I tried to ignore these questions, the more they haunted me.

In November of 2002,
I began to read a translation of the Qur'an.
I had never read an English translation of the entire text of the Qur'an before. I had only read summaries of the Qur'an written by non-Muslims.
(And very misleading summaries at that.)

Words do not adequately describe the extraordinary effect that this book had on me. Suffice to say that the very same magnetism that had drawn me to the Gospels at the age of eleven was present in a new and

*deeply imperative form. This book was telling me,
just as I could tell Jesus had been telling me,
about matters of ultimate concern.*

*The Qur'an was offering authoritative guidance and
compelling responses to the questions I had been asking
for years about the Gospels.*

*The Qur'an drew me to its message
because it powerfully and relentlessly confirmed
the sayings of Jesus that I felt in my heart had to be
authentic. I knew as a fact that something
had been changed in the Gospels.
I knew too that that something had been left
intact in the text of the Qur'an.*

NINE:

'There is no god but God'

> 'To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. God's retribution is severe. Should you then have fear of anyone other than God?' (QUR'AN 16:52)

A MUSLIM IS, literally, one who submits to the will of the One God.

❧❧❧

Today, a Muslim is someone who is willing to say, of his or her own free will, 'I believe that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God.'

Adherents of Islam do not view Muhammad, or any other prophet, as divine. They believe Jesus was a prophet of God, not God incarnate. They believe

Muhammad was a prophet of God, not God incarnate. They do, however, view the Qur'an, the text that was revealed to Muhammad, as divine in nature.

This may seem at first to be a difficult claim. Yet you should know that, if you agree with Jesus when he tells us that God knows everything that is in every human heart, and is aware of everything we think or plan or do …

> **'For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.'** (LUKE 12:2)

… then you already agree with the Qur'an.

If you agree with Jesus when he tells us humans will be held accountable after death for their deeds, and that those whose evil deeds are heavy in the balance will meet a fate very different than of the righteous …

> **'A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.'** (MATTHEW 7:18-19)

… then you already agree with the Qur'an.

If you agree with Jesus when he rejects Satan's attempt to call him 'Son of God' and forcefully insists that 'there is no god but God' …

> **'And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.'** (LUKE 4:8)

… then you already agree with the Qur'an.

These are the basic principles of Islam. If you still believe that Jesus' mission is incompatible with Islam, then you may want to consider reading the Qur'an … to determine for yourself whether or not it conflicts with the teachings of Jesus.

Muslims have no difficulty whatsoever celebrating Jesus as a great Prophet; his insistence on the points you just read are, we believe, not footnotes to a sacrificial rite, but the main thrust of the true faith. Look at them again.

We can hide nothing from God.

We will be judged on our thoughts, words, and deeds in the life to come, and there will be consequences for our choices in this life.

We are obliged to worship God Alone.

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

Do you believe that there is no god but God?

Most Christians I talk to will intuitively answer 'yes'—because it is very difficult indeed to imagine Jesus giving any other answer.

There remains only the question of whether you believe Muhammad, like Jesus, to have been a messenger of God.

Jesus told us: 'By their fruits shall you know them.' The 'fruit' of Muhammad's mission was and is the Qur'an. I have been telling you, in this book, about some of the many areas where the Qur'an matches up seamlessly with the historical mission of Jesus. But it would be a mistake to take my word, or the word of any human being, on a matter of this importance.

A great reformer once said: 'We all have to do our own believing, because we will all have to do our own dying.' For my part, I became a Muslim because I knew I had to do my own believing, not anyone else's. I became a Muslim because Jesus insisted that it was not enough merely to say 'Lord, Lord,' but far more important to do as he instructed.

Do as he instructs. Evaluate the fruits of Muhammad's mission for yourself. Read the Qur'an. And make your own decision.

Appendix A:

Q and the Qur'an

(Textual Note)

Many modern scholars believe that what matches up between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (once the earlier Gospel of Mark's influence is removed) is so frequently in agreement that it suggests a common source.

This hypothetical common source, designated Q, is believed to be even older than the Gospel of Mark, on which Matthew and Luke also clearly rely. The final version of Gospel of John dates from approximately 100 years after the birth of Jesus, and has no connection to Q.

The remnants of this early Gospel, imperfectly reconstructed by extracting parallel passages from Matthew and Luke, provide our best perspective on the ministry of the historical Jesus.

The following excerpt is, I think, a responsible overview of modern Q scholarship. It is reproduced by permission.

☙☙☙

THE SAYINGS GOSPEL Q

(Q) comprises a hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings, hypothesized in accordance with the two-source hypothesis to be a source of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The symbol Q comes from the first letter of the German word for source, Quelle.

The two-source hypothesis forms the most widely accepted solution to the synoptic problem, which posits that Matthew and Luke drew on two written sources, as shown by textual correspondences between their works. The Gospel of Mark forms one source, and Q the other. The existence of Q follows from the argument that Matthew and Luke show independence in the double tradition (the material that Matthew and Luke shared that does not appear in Mark). Accordingly, the literary connection in the double tradition is explained by an indirect relationship, namely, through use of a common source or sources.

Arguments for Luke's and Matthew's independence include:

Matthew and Luke have different contexts for the double tradition material. It is argued that it is easier to explain Luke's 'artistically inferior' arrangement of the double

tradition into more primitive contexts within his Gospel as due to not knowing Matthew.

The form of the material sometimes appears more primitive in Matthew but at other times more primitive in Luke.

Independence is likely in light of the non-use of the other's non-Markan tradition, especially in the infancy, genealogical, and resurrection accounts.

Doublets. Sometimes it appears that doublets in Matthew and Luke have one half that comes from Mark and the other half from some common source, i.e., Q.

Even if Matthew and Luke are independent, the Q hypothesis states that they used a common document. Arguments for Q being a written document include:

Exactness in Wording. Sometimes the exactness in wording is striking. For example: Matt. 6:24 = Luke 16:13 (27/28 Greek words). Matt. 7:7-8 = Luke 11:9-10 (24/24 Greek words).

There is commonality in order between the two Sermons on/at the Mount.

The presence of doublets, where Matthew and Luke sometimes present two versions of a similar saying, but in different contexts. Doublets often serve as a sign of two written sources.

Certain themes, such as the Deuteronomistic view of history, are more prominent in Q than in either Matthew or Luke individually.

—Source: Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org)

ꟗ ꟗ ꟗ

Modern reconstructions of Q make for important and fascinating reading for anyone interested in Jesus' message; one text of the hypothetical Gospel appears in Robert J. Miller's *The Complete Gospels* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.)

Reading this book is not meant to be a substitute for reading Q. The following parallel passages of Q and the Qur'an will, however, give a good sense of Q's remarkable compatibility with Islamic theology—a compatibility that cannot, I think be dismissed as coincidence, and that has not, I think, been widely noticed.

I do not believe that Q is the infallible Word of God, but I do believe it is an important step forward in Biblical scholarship of which all Christians should be aware. Most of the passages cited in this book are from Q. (Mark 10:18 is an exception to this.) All the Q passages I have referenced are cited below, followed by parallel passages in the Qur'an. Consider reading each Gospel passage out loud, and then reading the complementary teaching from the Qur'an. Do the passages sound as though they are issuing from the same Source … or from wholly different religious traditions?

ꟗ ꟗ ꟗ

'The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness. Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness.' (LUKE 11:34-35)

'Clear proofs have come to you from your Lord to open your eyes—so whosoever sees, will do so for the good of himself, and whosoever blinds himself, will do so against himself.' (QUR'AN 6:104)

ꝏꝏꝏ

'For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him.' (LUKE 19:26)

'Whoever brings a good deed shall have ten times the like thereof to his credit, and whoever brings an evil deed shall have only the recompense of the like thereof, and they will not be wronged.' (QUR'AN 6:160)

ꝏꝏꝏ

'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' (MATTHEW 6:21)

'As for whoever has exceeded the limits and preferred the life of this world, surely his abode will be the Fire (in the hereafter); and as for whoever has feared to stand before his Lord and restrained the desires of his self, surely his abode will be the Garden (in the hereafter). (QUR'AN 79:39-40)

ꙮ ꙮ ꙮ

'A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.' (LUKE 6:45)

'From the land that is clean and good, by the will of its Cherisher, springs up produce, (rich) after its kind: but from the land that is bad, springs up nothing but that which is niggardly: thus do we explain the Signs (by various symbols) to those who are grateful.' (QUR'AN 7:58)

ꙮ ꙮ ꙮ

'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (MATTHEW 5:3)

'*Salâmun 'Alaikum* (peace be upon you) for that you persevered in patience! Excellent indeed is the final home!' (QUR'AN, 13:24)

ℬℬℬ

'Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.' (LUKE 6:25)

'So let them laugh a little and (they will) cry much as a recompense of what they used to earn (by committing sins).' (QUR'AN 9:82)

ℬℬℬ

'And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.' (LUKE 12:4-5)

'To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and (all that is in) the earth and perpetual sincere obedience is (due) to Him. Will you then fear any other than God?' (QUR'AN, 16:52)

ꕥꕥꕥ

'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.' (MATTHEW 6:19-20)

'O my people! Truly, this life of the world is nothing but a (quick passing) enjoyment, and verily, the Hereafter that is the home that will remain forever. Whosoever does an evil deed, will not be requited except the like thereof, and whosoever does a righteous deed, whether male or female and is a true believer, such will enter Paradise, where they will be provided therein (with all things in abundance) without limit.' (QUR'AN, 40:39-40)

ꕥꕥꕥ

'Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.' (LUKE 9:62)

'Wavering between belief and disbelief! Belonging neither to this nor to that! Whom God allows to go astray, you have no ability to find a way for him.' (QUR'AN, 4:143)

ഗ ഗ ഗ

'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' (MATTHEW 5:44-45)

'Repel the evil deed of another with your good deeds. You will see that the one with whom you had enmity will become your close friend.' (QUR'AN 41:34)

ഗ ഗ ഗ

'And it came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed are

they that hear the word of God, and keep it.' (LUKE 11:27-28)

'It is not (possible) for any human being to whom God has given the Book and Wisdom and Prophethood to say to the people: 'Be my worshippers rather than God's.' On the contrary (he would say): 'Be devoted worshippers of your Lord, because you are teaching the Book, and you are studying it.' Nor would he order you to take angels and Prophets for lords. Would he order you to disbelieve after you have submitted to God's will?' (QUR'AN 3:79-80)

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

'Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?' (Matthew 7:9-11)

'How many creatures exist that do not carry their provisions along with them! God provides

for them just as he provides for you.' (QUR'AN 29:60)

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

'Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me. Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.' (MATTHEW 18:32-35)

'... Let them pardon and turn away (overlook faults); What! Do you not wish that God should forgive you? And God is Oft-Forgiving, All-Merciful.' (QUR'AN 24:22)

ꕥ ꕥ ꕥ

'Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait is the gate, and narrow

is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.' (Matthew 7:13-14)

'And (have we not) shown him the two highways? Yet he does not pursue the uphill path. What will tell you what the uphill path is?' (QUR'AN 90:10-12)

ꝏ ꝏ ꝏ

'When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished.' (MATTHEW 12:43-44)

'Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the King of mankind, the God of mankind, from the evil of the Sneaking Whisperer who whispers in the hearts of mankind…' (QUR'AN 114:1-5)

ꝏ ꝏ ꝏ

'Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee,

Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.’ (MATTHEW 5:25-26)

‘To whomsoever then the admonition has come from his Lord, then he desists, he shall have what has already passed (as a profit), and his affair is in the hands of Allah; and whoever returns (to it) — these are the inmates of the fire; they shall abide in it.’ (QUR’AN 2:275)

❦❦❦

‘For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.’ (LUKE 12:2)

‘He knows very well whatever they conceal or reveal even when they cover themselves with their garments. God certainly knows the inner-most (secrets) of the hearts.’ (QUR’AN 11:5)

❦❦❦

‘And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.’ (LUKE 4:8)

'Children of Adam, did We not command you not to worship Satan? He was your sworn enemy. Did We not command you to worship Me, and tell you that this is the straight path?' (QUR'AN 36:60-61)

'O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter anything concerning God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not 'Three'—Cease! (It is) better for you!—God is only One God. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that He should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And God is sufficient as Defender.' (QUR'AN 4:171)

APPENDIX B:

Common Questions

Do Muslims accept Jesus Christ?

THEY DO ACCEPT and revere him as a Prophet of extremely high rank, and as one of the most important figures in human history. They do not regard him as the only begotten Son of God.

No person who rejects Jesus Christ can be properly called a Muslim. Practitioners of the Religion are obliged to accept, and show deference and respect to the mission of Jesus Christ—just as they are obliged to accept, and show deference and respect to the missions of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Lot, and other familiar Prophets of the Bible. The lives and experiences of these remarkable men (and, interestingly, of the Virgin Mary) are set out in great detail in the Qur'an.

Do Muslims accept the Bible?

Muslims believe, and have held as a matter of faith for many centuries, that the text of the Christians Bible, including the four 'official' Gospels, was corrupted over the centuries by short-sighted human beings who had their eyes set on temporal gains (such as political or social influence).

This is also the view of the best modern scholars of the Biblical texts. In the various texts of the Gospels alone—texts that are, by the way, written in Greek, and not in the Aramaic that was actually spoken by Jesus—there are over three thousand textual disagreements, and clear evidence of extensive alteration by many hands over a period of many years.

Muslims regard the Qur'an as the unaltered Word of the Living God. They do not place the Bible in this category.

Does the Qur'an condone or encourage violence against innocent people?

No. It expressly forbids such actions. It also expressly forbids suicide. Disobeying its instructions on either of these points is a grave sin that exposes one's soul to the prospect of eternal hellfire.

Did the Prophet Muhammad teach hatred or intolerance?

No. He taught precisely the contrary. A famous saying of his is: 'There shall be no harm for harm, no revenge for revenge.' He may be the only political figure in history who, on assuming the role of emperor, proceeded to grant general amnesty to factions that he knew full well had plotted his assassination. He also vigorously protected the religious rights of non-Muslim groups under his protection.

Why don't Muslims excommunicate people who seem to violate (or seem to advocate the violation of) these teachings?

There is nothing to excommunicate them from. There is no hierarchy or mediator within the Religion; believers are *individually* accountable for their own decisions to obey, or to disregard, God's instructions.

Appendix C:

Note to Atheists and Agnostics

Every responsible voyager across unknown territory has to establish a contingency route of some kind. Suppose you were scaling a mountain no one had ever climbed—you would have to develop a primary strategy, and then a secondary strategy for reaching your destination in case of miscalculation, unforeseen circumstances, or simple bad luck.

So. You have never died before. What is your backup plan?